First Things First

10/9/60

A FEW MONTHS AGO LIFE MAGAZINE BEGAN A SERIES OF ARTICLES ON NATIONAL PURPOSE OR GOALS. LEADING MEN FROM DIFFERENT FIELDS, LAWYERS, SCIENTISTS, POLITICIANS AND EVANGELISTS WERE ASKED TO DESCRIBE THEIR THOUGHTS ON WHAT SHOULD BE OUR GOALS,--TOWARDS WHAT END RESULTS WE SHOULD BE DIRECTING OUR EFFORTS AS A NATION. OF COURSE THE OBVIOUS UNDERLYING IMPLICATION OF THIS SERIES IS THAT AT PRESENT WE EITHER HAVE NO DEFINABLE GOALS OR IF WE DO, WE HAVE LOST CONTACT WITH THEM, THEY HAVE BECOME LOST IN A MAZE OF LESSER OR MINOR GOALS. THIS SITUATION HAS BEEN DESCRIBED--"AMERICA, AS A NATION, HAS LOST HER SOUL."

AS ONE WHO SEES THE MIRACULOUS FIRST CENTURY EVENT OF THE APPEARANCE OF JESUS CHRIST IN HISTORY AS THE MOST IMPORTANT, THE MOST MOMENTOS EVENT EVER, I, AND YOU MUST NECESSARILY THINK IN THESE TERMS FIRST WHEN CONSIDERING OUR GOALS AND AIMS; INDIVIDUALLY AND AS A NATION. OUR BELIEFS ARE QUITE INSIGNIFICANT IF THEY HAVE NO PLACE AMONG THE THINGS WE HOLD MOST DEAR, AMONG THE THINGS WE CONSIDER TO BE OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE.

THIS MORNING I WANT TO DISCUSS BRIEFLY THIS PROBLEM OF PUTTING FIRST THINGS (OR RATHER OUR FAILURE TO DO SO), FIRST ON THE NATIONAL SCALE AND SECOND ON AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL.

BEFORE I BEGIN THE DISCUSSION ON THE NATIONAL LEVEL LET ME SAY THAT I CONSIDER

THE AMERICAN FORM OF DEMOCRACY TO BE THE HIGHEST POLITICAL ACHIEVEMENT MANKIND HAS EVER KNOWN. IN THIS LAND A MAN HAS, MORE THAN ANY OTHER PLACE IN THE WORLD, THE RESPECT DUE TO HIM, HE HAS THE RIGHT TO GOVERN HIMSELF, TO MAKE AS MUCH MONEY AS HE CAN AND SO ON. IN SHORT I, LIKE ANY OTHER AMERICAN, WOULD BE QUITE WILLING TO FIGHT FOR THESE PRINCIPLES AND THEIR ACCOMPANYING WAY OF LIFE.

TIME AND TIME AGAIN YOU HAVE HEARD OUR COUNTRY CALLED A CHRISTIAN NATION, ESPECIALLY IN TIMES OF CRISIS SUCH AS WAR PRAYERS ARE LIFTED TO GOD TO AID HIS COUNTRY AND ITS CAUSE (AMERICA OF COURSE) AGAINST THE ENMY WHICH MUST BE HIS ENEMY ALSO. UP UNTIL THIS POLITICAL CAMPAIGN CANDIDATES FOUND THAT A WORD HERE AND THERE ABOUT GOD, FAITH AND PERSONAL PIETY WERE WORTH LOTS OF VOTES, POLITICAL LEADERS FREQUENTLY SPEAK OF THE NECESSITY OF FAITH AND THE IMPLICATION IS FAITH IN CHRISTIAN PRINCIPLES. BUT AS CHRISTIANS WE MUST REALIZE THAT TO CALL OUR NATION A CHRISTIAN NATION IS A LOGICAL PARADOX BECAUSE THE NATURE OUR CONSTITUTION ITSELF MAKES IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR OUR COUNTRY TO BE LABELED CHRISTIAN OR ANY OTHER NAME DESIGNATING A PSECIFIC SET OF BELIEFS. ALTHOUGH THINGS AREN'T ALWAYS THAT CUT AND DRIED, THEORETICALLY RELIGION HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH THE FORM, FUNCTION AND GOALS OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY. A QUICK LOOK INTO HISTORY EXPLAINS WHY THIS IS SO.

EVER SINCE THE ROMAN EMPEROR CONSTANTINE DECIDED IN THE YEAR 323 A.D. tHAT THE WORLD WOULD BE CHRISTIAN, GOVERNMENTS OF THE WESTERN WORLD HAVE BEEN PROFOUNDLY

INFLUENCED BY AND EVEN CONTROLLED BY RELIGION. IN 800 CHARLAMAGNE WAS EMPEROR OF THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE IN 500 YEARS THE FORTUNES OF THE EMPIRE AND THE CHURCH WERE IDENTICAL. WHERE ONE VENTURED THE OTHER QUICKLY FOLLOWED. ROMAN LEGIONS LED THE WAY FOR HASTY INDOCTRINATION BY THE HOLY ROMAN CHURCH. BRAVE MISSIONARIES CLEARED THE PATH FOR HASTY ASSIMILATION INTO THE EMPIRE. THE CHURCH AND CHRISTIANITY WERE MAN'S ULTIMATE CONCERN: IN A LIFE CHARACTERIZED BY IGNORANCE, POVERTY AND THE RESULTS OF FEUDALISM. THE CHURCH OFFERED MEN A FLICKER OF HOPE. WITH THE REFORMATION THE CHURCH SPLIT AND BRANCHED OUT IN MANY DIFFERENET DIRECTIONS BUT THE CONERN WAS THE SAME—CHRISTIANITY WAS OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE. A 30 YEARS WAR RIPPED EUROPE TO SHREDS OVER RELIGION, MEN WERE ROUSED TO PASSION BECAUSE OF THEIR BELIEFS THE CHURCHWAS THE GOVERNING FACTOR IN THEIR LIVES.

AND THEN A UNIQUE PHENOMENON APPEARED—GRADUALLY AT FIRST, AND SNOWBALLING LATER, SCHOLARS IN THE INTELLECTUAL CENTERS, VENICE, PARIS, ANTWERP, BONN, ZURICH AND PRAGUE BEGAN TALKING IN TERMS UNRELATED TO THE CHURCH. THIS WAS THE PERIOD OF ENLIGHTENINMENT. A NEW ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE WAS BORNE IN POLITICAL SCIENCE AND FOR THE FIRST TIME A SET OF IDEAS WAS BORN AND SURVIVED WITH NO CONNECTION TO THE CHURCH WHATSOEVER. PHILOSOPHERS AND POETS FOLLOWED SUIT, THE AIR WAS FULL OF IDEAS ABOUT GOOD, TRUTH, HUMAN RIGHTS AND SURPRISINGLY ENOUGH THEY GREW IN AN ATMOSPHERE DEVOID OF RELIGION. UNTIL THAT TIME/THE ONLY MUSIC TO BE HEARD WERE MASSES, LITURGICAL CHANTS

OR FOLK MUSIC AND SUDDENTLY MUSICIANS DISCOVERED THAT THE SOUNDS OF A MOTET, A FUGUE OR A SYMPHONY WERE DELIGHTFUL IN THEMSELVES EVEN WHEN THEY HAD NO PART TO PLAY IN THE CHURCH.

ALL THIS WAS GOING ON IN VERY CHOICE INTELECTUAL CIRCLES TO BE SURE BUT SLOWLY THE ATMOSPHERE OF THE TIME REACHED THE COMMON MIND. WHAT HAPPENED WAS QUICK AND DISASTROUS FOR CENTURIES MEN AND LIVED IN IGNORANCE, AND HUNGER UNDER FEUDAL LORDS AND UNDER THE CHURCH—AND NOW A FEW MEN HAD DEMONSTRATED THE GLORIES OF THE HUMAN MIND AND THE GLORIES OF LIVING AN ENLIGHTENED LIFE WITHOUT THE SLIGHTEST CONCERN WITH THE CHURCH. A FEW EVEN OUTRIGHTLY CONDEMNED THE CHURCH AND SAID THAT IT WAS THE SOLE REASON FOR THE DERK AGES THAT WERE NOW OVER.

THE ANALOGY BECAME CRYSTAL CLEAR—THE CHURCH STOOD FOR IGNORANCE, SUPERSTITION, THE CHURCH WAS THE REASON MEN HAD SPENT SO MUCH TIME FIGHTING ONE ANOTHER AND SLOWLY MEN DISCARDED THE CHURCH AND UNFORTUNATELY CHRISTIANITY AS UNIMPORTANT. IN FRANCE CATHEDRALS WERE TURNED INTO TEMPLES OF REASON, RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS WERE REPLACED WITH SYMBOLS OF THE NEW FRENCH REPUBLIC, NATIONAL SONGS TOOK THE PLACE OF HUMNS, HEORES THE PLACE OF SAINTS AND "LA PATRIE THE PLACE OF THE CHURCH."

THE MEN THAT FOUNDED OUR COUNTRY WERE THE RESULTS OF THIS NEW TYPE OF THINKING. JEFFERSON, FRANKLIN, ADAMS, MONROE, PAINE WERE ENLIGHTENMENT THINKERS AND THEY MADE

QUITE CERTAIN THAT THE CHURCH WOULD NEVER CAUSE IGNORANCE AND SERVITUDE, HUNGER AND STRIFE TO PLAGUE THEIR LAND. THEY MADE QUITE CERTAIN THAT THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST WOULD NEVER EXERCISE INFLUENCE IN THEIR NEW, DEMOCRATIC AND ENLIGHTENED FORM OF GOVERNMENT. THEY MADE SURE CHURCH AND STATE WERE SEPARATED AND SO IT SHOULD BE. BUT BECAUSE OF THIS AMERICANS EVER SINCE HAVE NEVER BEGUN TO EXPRESS THE TRUE IMPORTANCE OF THEIR CHURCH WE HAVE NOT ONLY SUCCEEDED IN SEPARATING CHURCH AND STATE WE HAVE ELIMINATED THE CHURCH FROM THE SPHERE OF COMMON IMPORTANCE.

AGAIN LET ME REPEAT THAT AMERICAN DEMOCRACY IS THE MATERIALIZATION OF PRINCIPLES THAT ARE NECESSARY, OUR GOVERNMENT HAS HOLD OF A SYSTEM THAT WILL PROVIDE PEACE AND JUSTICE AS MUCH AS IS HUMANLY POSSIBLE. BUT LET US NOT IDENTIFY THIS WAY OF LIFE WITH THE KINGDOM OF GOD, LET US NOT IMAGINE THAT THE LORD GOD SMILES DOWN ON WHITE, PROTESTANT AMERICANS AND THEIR GOVERNMENT LET US NOT PRAY THAT GOD WILL AID US OVERCOME OUR ENEMIES BECAUSE THEY ARE HIS ENEMIES—LET US REALIZE THAT OUR GOVERNMENT IS A SYSTEM OF GOVERNMING MEN AND IN NO WAY A DIVINELY INSPIRED CONNECTING LINK BETWEEN GOD AND MAN. OUR GOD RESIDES OVER AND ABOVE THIS HUMAN INSTITUTION AS HE DOES ALL OTHERS AND JUDGES IT AS HE DOES ALL OTHERS WHEN WE ARE TRYING TO PUT FIRST THINGS FIRST LET US NOT FORGET THAT GOD AND THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN ARE ALREADY FIRST. LET US NOT EVEN ATTEMPT TO WEIGHT CHURCH AND STATE ON THE SAME SCALE RATHER LET US LOOK AT THE STATE THROUGH THE WINDOWS OF THE CHURCH. FROM THE STARTING POINT OF

CHRISTIANITY LET US A SUME OUR ROLES IN AMERICAN DEMOCRACY.

PUTTING FIRST THINGS FIRST ON THE INDIVIDUAL SCALE IS A HIT MORE COMPLEX THAN THE COLLECTIVE PROBLEM. THIS PROBLEM WAS EVIDENT IN BIBLICAL TIMES WHEN JESUS FOUND MEN OFFERING EXCUSES SUCH AS--LET ME GO FIRST AND BURY MY DEAD, OR LET ME WORK IN THE FIELD FIRST OR LET ME BID FAREWELL TO MY RELATIVES--tO HIS CALL TO FOLLOW AND BECOME DISCIPLES.

IN THE WORLD OF BUSINESS THE PASSWORD BEHIND THE CLOSED CONFERENCE ROOM DOORS IS LET'S GET DOWN TO BRASS TACKS "YOU KNOW THIS AND I KNOW THAT" SO LET'S GET DOWN TO BUSINESS. BUT IN PERSONAL EXPERIENCE PEOPLE HAVE AN AMAZING KNACK FOR AVOIDING EVERYTHING CRUCIAL AND IMPORTANT. IT IS A GOOD RULE FOR LIVIN GTO PUT FIRST THINGS FIRST, BUT FOR A CHRISTIAN IT IS A MUST, A NECESSITY. WHEN WE DO THIS, WHEN WE MAKE A SINCERE ATTEMPT TO MAKE THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS COME FIRST IN OUR LIVES IT IS CLEAR THAT CHRISTIANITY MUST COME FIRST OR ELSE IT NO LONGER CAN BE CALLED A RELIGION. IT IS THE FOUNDATION FROM WHICH WE CONDUCT OUR DAILY LIVES, IT IS THE YARD STICK WITH WHICH WE MEASURE OUR BEHAVIOR.

AMERICAN PEOPLE HAVE REFLECTED, IN THEIR PERSONAL LIVES, THE LAGGING CONCERN FOR RELIGION I DESCRIBED EARLIER ON THE NATIONAL LEVEL.

ONE OF THE BITS OF AMERICAN PROTOCAL EVERYONE EVENTUALLY LEARNS IS--NEVER DISCUSS

YOUR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS, NEVER PUSH ANOTHER PERSON ABOUT HIS, AVOID RELIGIOUS ARGUMENTS. ONE STATEMENT YOU'LL ALL KNOW HEARD TIME AND TIME AGAIN IS "RELIGION IS A MAN'S PRIVATE BUSINESS AND I DON'T BELIEVE IN TALKING TO HIM ABOUT IT ETC." THE FACTS ARE THAT CHRISTIANITY SIMPLY ISN'T TOO IMPORTANT TO MOST CHRISTIANS. (PROTESTANTS)

AMERICAN PEOPLE ARE SO CAUGHT UP IN THE GLORIOUS PRINCIPLE OF SEPARATING CHURCH AND STATE THAT THEY HAVE CREATED A GREAT BARRIER TO CHRISTIANITY AND ADDED WEIGHT TO THE ALL READY SLOWLY MOVING WHEELS OF PROGRESS. BY COMPLETELY SEVERING CHURCH AND STATE WE HAVE GREATLY REDUCED THE POSSIBILITY THAT OUR CHILDREN WILL BE EDUCATED IN THE MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL DISCIPLINES. THERE IS NO DOUBT ABOUT IT WE HAVE RAISED A GENERATION (OR QUITE A FEW GENERATIONS) OR RELIGIOUS ILLITERATES. ASK ANY STUDENT A QUESTION IN HISTORY AND HE WILL PROBABLY RETORT WITH AN ACCURATE, INTELLIGENT ANSWER. HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS KNOW CHEMISTRY, BIOLOGY, MATHEMATICS, ENGLISH, LANGUAGES, THEY READ LOTS OF BOOKS, BALANCE EQUATIONS,--BUT ASK A PROTESTANT STUDENT TO GIVE HIS VIEWS ON THE TRINITY, OR REVELATION, ASK THEM WHAT THE ATONEMENT MEANS, ASK THEM WHO WROTE THE BOOK OF HEBREWS, OR SOMETHING ABOUT THE HISTORY OF ISRAEL. I DON'T HAVE TO PUSH IT ANY FARTHER WE ARE TRYING TO MAKE INTELLIGENT CHRISTIANS OUT OF PEOPLE WHOSE ONLY OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN IS ONE HOUR A WEEK. AS YOU ALL KNOW CHRISTIAN EDUCATION PRESENTS A PROBLEM IN ANY CHURCH. PEOPLE WHO ARE TRULY CONCERNED WITH THIS

WITH THIS PROBLEM FIND THEMSELVES LIMITED NOT ONLY BY A MERE ONE HOUR A WEEK BUT THE OVER ALL FEELING THAT WHAT IS TAUGHT IN SUNDAY SCHOOL IS SIMPLY NOT TOO IMPORTANT NICE TO KNOW BUT SIMPLY NOT IMPORTANT.

NOW LET US ALL GET DOWN TO BUSINESS, LET'S CLEAR THE DECK OF ALL NONSENSE AND AFTER WE HAVE DONE THIS EVERYONE OF YOU WILL GLADLY ADMIT THAT CHRISTIANITY IS IMPORTANT, AND IF YOU'RE PUSHED YOU WILL PROBABLY EVEN AGREE THAT IN THE LONG RUN IT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN YOUR LIFE.

MAKING THIS ADMISSION DOES NOT END THE MATTER RATHER IT BEGINS IT. THE DISCIPLES OF JESUS AND MEN THROUGHOUT THE CENTURIES HAVE LIVED RADICALLY DIFFERENT LIVES WHEN THEY CAME TO THE REALIZATION THAT WHAT THIS MAN WAS TELLING THEM WAS NOT A MATTER THAT COULD BE TAKEN CARE OF IN ONE HOUR A WEEK. WHEN THEY MADE THE REALIZATION THAT THIS MAN WAS GOD INCARNATE WHO HAD COME AMONG THEM OFFERING GOD'S GRACE AND FORGIVENESS TO ANY WHO WOULD ACCEPT THEY FOUND THAT EVERYTHING WAS DIFFERENT. IN THIS MAN THEY FOUND LIGHT, TRUTH, UNDERSTANDING AND COMPASSION, THEY FOUND THAT THEY WERE COMPELLED TO REGARD EVERYTHING IN LIFE AS UNIMPORTANT COMPARED TO THEIR STARTLING NEW FAITH. I HAVE TALKED ABOUT ONE WAY IN WHICH WE HAVE FAILED TO BEAR THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF OUR CALLING CHRISTIAN EDUCATION. TO CORRECT THIS WOULD TAKE RADICAL MEASURES THAT I HAVEN'T TIME TO DISCUSS HERE. BUT AS A STARTER WE CAN EACH SIMPLY STAND OFF AND TAKE A LOOK AT OUR LIVES AND MAKE A SIMPLE MEASUREMENT WHAT IS